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THE BOOK OF THE MONTH¹

BY F. M. COLBY

PEOPLE seldom show to so great disadvantage as when wrangling over Bernard Shaw, and it is a comfort nowadays to find them settling down and inclined to take him rather more for granted. Time was when the production or publication of a Shaw play was followed inevitably by a sort of literary influenza. Minds that ought never to have been exposed to Shaw were sure to take him very badly, while the chronic Shavian was almost certain to become intolerable; neither sort could any more keep from writing a column about him than they could stop a sneeze. Shaw himself has turned this tendency to account in "Fanny's First Play," and his burlesque of the critics seems hardly exaggerated:

TROTTER (*wearily*). And naturally, here we are all talking about him. For Heaven's sake, let us change the subject.

VAUGHAN. Still, my articles about Shaw—

GUNN. Oh, stop it, Vaughan! Drop it. What I've always told you about Shaw is—

BANNAL. There you go, Shaw, Shaw, Shaw! Do chuck it. If you want to know my opinion about Shaw—

TROTTER } { No, please, we don't.

VAUGHAN } (*yelling*). { Shut, your head, Bannal.

GUNN } { Oh, do drop it.

The deafened Count puts his fingers in his ears and flies from the center of the group to its outskirts, behind Vaughan.

BANNAL (*sulkily*). Oh, very well. Sorry I spoke, I'm sure.

TROTTER } { Shaw—

VAUGHAN } (*beginning again simultaneously*). { Shaw—

GUNN } { Shaw—

From the spirit of these discussions it would seem that the effect of this stimulating or, at the worst, provocative

¹ *Misalliance: Fanny's First Play: The Dark Lady of the Sonnets.* By Bernard Shaw. Brentano's, N. Y., 1914. Pp. 245.

writer has often been precisely the opposite of what one would have supposed—reducing the vitality, sometimes even impairing the minds, of the persons who read him. It is probable that the effect of Shaw on a literal mind anxious about Culture, or on an academic intellect already a little run down, is indeed very debilitating, and this may well account for the sort of articles we used to see in some of our more weighty periodicals. “Mountebank,” exclaimed one writer, a professor of English, I believe, “mountebank, charlatan, and pygmy soul,” and then added rather faintly, as it seemed to me, that if Emerson were to come to life again and meet Bernard Shaw, Emerson would be considerably surprised. Why, he is nothing but a jester, said another, and turned away his eyes; and meanwhile the word “paradox” was heard so often among literary commentators that it seemed like the quacking of some strange aquatic fowl. Amidst these rather unintelligible academic gaspings you could sometimes make out the more distinct reproach that Shaw, though undeniably clever, was, after all, that loathliest and most unpardonable thing, a self-advertiser.

Now among healthy haters damnation could not have taken on these sickly hues. Nobody in a lusty state of indignation would content himself with telling his enemy that he would occasion Emerson some surprise. Nobody in a normal condition would despair of a man on making the really cheerful and interesting discovery that the man was a jester. And as to the taunt of “self-advertisement,” what possible sting can be found in a term that applies as well to John the Baptist, Alexander the Great, Job, Shakespeare, and Peter the Hermit as to Bernard Shaw? Yet a large body of Shaw comment, proceeding often from grave and learned quarters, and extending over a term of years, will be found, I believe, to consist essentially of these same harmless mutterings. He is a gymnotus to the literary commentators, whose minds when they touch him are always a little benumbed.

There was, to be sure, Mr. A. B. Walkely, formerly dramatic critic of the *London Times*, the one bright figure in that rather forlorn profession, for Mr. Walkely could no more help writing reasonably and delightfully about a Shaw play than on any other subject pertaining to the stage; but in the collected writings of almost every other dramatic

critic it is wise to skip the inevitable chapter on Bernard Shaw. And even Mr. Walkely cannot quite rid himself of pedantic scruples and must needs get entangled in nomenclature and fidget over some such conundrum as, Why is a Shaw play not a play? after freely admitting that whatever the thing might be called it was about the only really desirable thing in a generation of British playwriting. Which rather punctilious attitude is duly noted by Shaw in "Fanny's First Play," where Mr. Walkely appears, burlesqued as Trotter, the dramatic critic, and is made to say:

I am aware that one author, who is, I blush to say, a personal friend of mine, resorts freely to the dastardly subterfuge of calling them conversations, discussions, and so forth, with the express purpose of disarming such criticism. But I'm not to be disarmed by such tricks. I say they are not plays. . . .

He declares sternly that he cannot remain in the house another minute if they are to be foisted on him as plays.

TROTTER. . . . You admire these theatrical nondescripts? You enjoy them?

FANNY. Don't you?

TROTTER. Of course I do. Do you take me for a fool? Do you suppose I prefer popular melodramas? Have I not written most appreciative notices of them? But I say they're not plays. . . .

TROTTER. . . . If you had been classically educated—

FANNY. But I have.

TROTTER. Pooh! Cambridge! If you had been educated at Oxford, you would know that the definition of a play has been settled exactly and scientifically for two thousand two hundred and sixty years. I don't mean in my sense of the word, but in the sense given to it for all time by the immortal Stagirite.

This brings to mind a good many thick and dreary volumes written by persons in this country who do not in other respects at all resemble Mr. Walkely. Had he lived among them, he would, I am sure, have long since recanted. They are the critics by the rule of thumb, who would leave no room for the unexpected. In this time of dearth they are engaged in the unnecessary work of proving beforehand that exuberance is impossible. At a time when the theater is not employed for half the purposes that it might serve, they insist on the limitations of the theater, and peg away at fatalistic definitions which shall exclude for ever the possibility of surprise. Let us be content, they say, with what the stage can give. Beware of breaking the mold, or of mixing the arts, or of failing to "allow for the right effect across the

footlights," or of too much talk, or of thoughts too deep for a crowd, or wit too subtle, or matters too complex or poetic or fanciful. Yet of all times this seems to be about the worst for urging people not to attempt too much. It is a time when every reasonable playgoing body craves the very thing that is antecedently from the critic's point of view impossible. It was not the limitations of the stage that accounted for the fact that we all got so soon to the end of Mr. Pinero some years ago. It was the limitations of Mr. Pinero. Had the late Mr. Clyde Fitch been twice as large and strange, the stage would probably have found room for him. Crowds do not always suffer when good things go over their heads, and we all know that there have been dramatists who quite shamelessly indulged in poetry, theology, metaphysics, anything they liked, cajoling the many while they spoke to a few, or to one man, or to the men of the next century. Current theories of the stage seem never to take into account the fact that, after all, the moments do arrive when we encounter the unexpected and attain the hitherto unachieved, and that these rare moments are the history of the drama. There will never be a good play in this country till the playwright gets him a fairy godmother, and if that time ever comes I venture to say that the man will be a lawbreaker in the land of humdrum, and that no antecedent theory of the stage will have left any room for him. Any man with a high order of talent, like Mr. Shaw, will do things with his tools that are regarded beforehand as highly improbable; he will achieve successfully what all sober critics of the stage to-day would say it is silly to attempt. And as to the man of genius, when have the critics ever guessed in advance what he would be up to?

Some of the best criticism of Shaw has been written by Shaw himself, and put into the mouths of his characters. The "ideas" which he sets forth so triumphantly in the preface do not by any means have everything their own way in the play. The dramatic sense is too strong for him, and he cannot as a playwright remain exclusively a doctrinaire. In some of his plays no one who had not read the preface could have guessed the purpose, and even after you know the purpose it is hard to realize that it has been fulfilled. His own mind may be made up, but his wit is very impartial, and he bestows a fair share of it on the enemies of his cause. It is often astonishing how well the poor fools described in

the preface acquit themselves in the play itself. Johnny, in the play entitled "Misalliance" in this volume, is to all intents and purposes an "ordinary business man," a Philistine, and a "chump." Johnny, to be sure, gets some hard raps in the course of the play and is left at the end of it rather distomfited. But he has his say, nevertheless, and makes out a pretty good case for his own stupidity:

JOHNNY. . . . I bet you what you like that, page for page, I read more than you, though I don't talk about it so much. Only, I don't read the same books. I like a book with a plot in it. You like a book with nothing in it but some idea that the chap that writes it keeps worrying, like a cat chasing its own tail. I can stand a little of it, just as I can stand watching a cat for two minutes, say, when I've nothing better to do. But a man soon gets fed up with that sort of thing. The fact is, you look on an author as a sort of god. I look on him as a man that I pay to do a certain thing for me. I pay him to amuse me and take me out of myself and make me forget. . . . If I buy a book, or go to the theater, I want to forget the shop and forget myself from the moment I go in to the moment I come out. That's what I pay my money for. And if the author's simply getting at me all the time, I consider that he's obtained my money under false pretenses. I'm not a morbid crank; I'm a natural man; and as such I don't like being got at. If a man in my employment did it, I should sack him. If a member of my club did it, I should cut him. If he went too far with it, I should bring his conduct before the committee. I might even punch his head, if it came to that. Well, who and what is an author, that he should be privileged to take liberties that are not allowed to other men? . . . But I do say that the time has come for sane, healthy, unpretending men like me to make a stand against this conspiracy of the writing and talking and artistic lot to put us in the back row. It isn't a fact that we're inferior to them; it's a put-up job, and it's they that have put the job up. It's we that run the country for them; and all the thanks we get is to be told that we're Philistines and vulgar tradesmen and sordid city men and so forth, and that they're all angels of light and leading.

He calls "Fanny's First Play" a mere pot-boiler and says it needs no preface, but he cannot let it go without a little one, nevertheless. In this he implies that the play is an attack on "morality." By "morality" he means "the substitution of custom for conscience." It is better, he says, that young people should have their souls awakened by a month's hard labor in jail than drift along to the end of their lives "doing what other people do for no other reason than that other people do it."

Is it any wonder that I am driven to offer to young people in our suburbs the desperate advice: Do something that will get you into trouble?

Accordingly, the young people in the play do get into trouble; they revolt against "middle-class respectability,"

spend a month in jail with the full approval of their consciences, and in defending their course easily get the better of their scandalized elders.

It is no doubt essential to Shaw's purpose that respectability shall always be scandalized, for how else could his precious Life Force have its way? But it does seem at times a little monotonous. I do not recall a single play in which one set of characters are not being continuously shocked by the too bold thinking of another set of characters. It is all very well for young people to scandalize respectability incidentally while achieving their own ends, but that their lives should be narrowed down to the sole work of scandalizing respectability as an end in itself is, I think, a cruel repression. With Shaw the scandalization of respectability often becomes a restrictive routine quite at variance with his own theories of soul-expansion. Shaw's young people seem never to know what they want till somebody tells them what they ought not to have. They are not free; they are the slaves of eternal contrariety. Instead of "doing what other people do for no other reason than that other people do it," they will often plod along very laboriously in the gutter for no other reason than that other people walk on the pavement. Why their "souls" should "awaken" in the course of this rather mechanical procedure I never could quite make out.

In "Misalliance," Woman at the behest of the Life Force is still pursuing Man as she has been doing in Shawland any time these twenty years. "The Dark Lady of the Sonnets" is a trifle in which Shakespeare is the leading character. Nearly half of the present volume is taken up with a charming and altogether unscrupulous treatise on "Parents and Children," which any one who is inclined to believe in Shaw's "philosophy" ought to read in order to rid himself for ever of the notion that Shaw has a single philosophic fiber in his composition. It is a masterpiece of eloquent unqualified assertion in matters of which no honest man, capable of self-analysis, could feel at all certain. He curses his own schooling, says it taught him nothing whatever, and thinks if he could have been free of it and developed in his own way it would have been much better. But how can he judge of that? Had he turned out more Shavian than he now is, society would probably have hanged him.

F. M. COLBY.